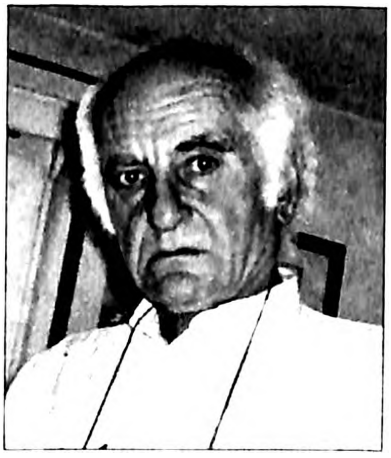
Jozef BARUHOVIĆ

UNDER THE SAME ROOF AS THE GERMANS



Jozef Baruhović was born in Sarajevo on December 21, 1934, to father Dr Haim Baruhović and mother Sida, Simha née Izrael. He has a sister, Rašela, whose married name is Malina and who lives in Israel. All members of his immediate family survived the Holocaust.

Until the war in 1941, the family lived in Zagreb where his father was in the services as an active officer and army doctor. Before the war the family moved to Sarajevo, while Jozef's father remained in the services in Zagreb. He was in Sarajevo for the April war, the capitulation of Yugoslavia and the entry of the German troops into the city. He then fled to Mostar, Priština, Skadar, Tirana and, finally Belgrade. From 1945 to 1953 he lived in Priština. He enrolled in the Electrical Engineering Faculty at Belgrade University in 1953 and graduated in 1959. In 1986, he completed postgraduate studies. He worked as an engineer in the Belgrade company Elektrosrbija-Minel and then at the Chemical Industry in Pančevo until his retirement in 2002.

He was active in the Jewish Community in Belgrade in the period from 1960 to 1985 as a member of the Community Council.

Until 1941, that is until the very beginning of the April war, we lived a comfortable life in Zagreb as the family of a serving officer. We had a batman – a soldier and housekeeper. Father was an army doctor,

captain first class, and would soon be promoted to the rank of major. In 1939 the family gained a new member with the birth of my sister Rašela. The family was more secular than religious. They would occasionally take me to the synagogue, which I enjoyed because I would find many of my peers there.

The first hint of war came with Jewish refugees from Austria and Germany. One day they moved an elderly couple into our apartment. We took them in, providing them with accommodation and food. Mother spoke good German and would have long conversations with them in the evenings. Their message was: run, run! Mother kept repeating this to Father all the time. Father believed that we were local residents, citizens of Yugoslavia and that we were not in any danger. However, in the end, they decided that we should seek refuge in Sarajevo. Mother's relatives lived there and, according to Father's officer friends, Sarajevo, with its surrounding hills, would be well defended in the event of war.

Jozef comes from a south Serbian Jewish Sephardic family: in this 1937 photograph, father Dr Haim Baruhović is in uniform, beside him is mother Sida (Simha); little Jozef is sitting in the front row

Father went more and more frequently on manoeuvres and would be away for days on end. We left for Sarajevo. For a while we lived in peace there. Then one day mother suddenly woke me and my sister up, took us in her arms and hurried down to the basement with us. The

bombing began. At that time we were living in Obala, in a pleasant and spacious apartment belonging to Mother's brother. There were explosions echoing outside. As soon as the all-clear sounded for the end of the danger, Mother gathered up some essentials, we made bundles and went out into the street. Outside there was already a river of people fleeing. We set off towards the Prica family. Ognjen Prica's sister was a good friend of my mother from her school days. They lived in a modest house outside Sarajevo. When we arrived, their house was already full of refugees. We settled in a corner of the room. That is where we were during the second bombing. At one moment during the bombing there was a terrible explosion and we all fell to the floor. The room filled up with smoke and dust. As soon as the all-clear sounded for the end of the air raid, we ran out of the house into the street and headed for the hills. Beside the house where we had found shelter, there was a now a huge, gaping hole, made by the bomb which had fallen there.

We spent a few more days in the hills and then a rumour spread that the war was over. We went down to Sarajevo and headed for our apartment. There were German soldiers and German motor vehicles in the streets, with unfurled flags and swastikas on them. Our first contact with the Germans was when they came to our apartment and took two leather armchairs. They needed furniture for the Command which had been set up somewhere near our apartment. They were also taking furniture from other apartments. A few days later they returned the two armchairs. Soon the measures against Jews began. From the balcony of our apartment we watched thieves remove the copper cladding from the Kal Grande Temple. A curfew was also introduced for Jews and Mother was required to wear a yellow star. Before long a commissioner moved into our apartment and we had to move out of our pleasant home in Obala. We moved into a bedsit owned by mother's other sister, Esperanca, at 1 Petrarkina Street. Soon the arrests began, with people being taken away to camps, shot and hanged. They shot Ognjen Prica, as an old communist, along with several other prominent Jews. The deportation of Jews to camps also began. A Black Mariah, a truck converted into a windowless bus, painted black, took dozens of Jews to camps every night. In the beginning, no one knew where they were being taken. When people learnt this, and heard about the conditions in which they were living, the remaining families began sending parcels with food, but soon a rumour spread that parcels should not be sent because there was no information about whether these people were

even still alive and that the Ustaša were opening the parcels, taking the food and replacing it with stones. Then word went around that people should convert to Catholicism and be baptised. This baptism needed to be paid for. But even baptism didn't help. They would take people to camp baptised or not. I learnt all about this by listening to Mother talking to her sister Esperanca. With the constant talk about hanging and shooting, I also tried to hang myself. I tied around my neck a rope from a curtain rail and jumped from the bed. There was a strong pain and I began to suffocate. Mother ran to me and took the rope from my neck. I was scarred from this for quite a long time.

One day we went to the Army Command. Mother knew that a friend of my father - an officer from Zagreb - was in Sarajevo. I think that his name was Nardeli and that he had become a colonel in the home guard. Mother wanted us to get out of Sarajevo at any price. She went to see Nardeli and asked him to arrange for passes for us. He received us and asked us to wait. He went to an adjacent office and soon we heard shouting in German from there. Mother quickly took me by the hand and we fled his office. The German officer was shouting at the home guard colonel for allowing himself to be involved in helping a Jew.

After this incident it was as if there was no hope for salvation. We had all prepared bundles which stood on the table, because we expected the Black Mariah to pick us up any night. However, soon after, there appeared at our door a Croat named Ante, a Catholic, he worked for the husband of Mother's second sister, Erna, from Mostar. He took me by the hand, led me straight to the railway station and took me to Mostar. A few days later my mother arrived with my sister Rašela, who was barely two at the time. Mother's sister Erna and her husband David had managed to bribe the home guard colonel. They got my mother and sister to Mostar in a rented passenger vehicle. They got a few more members of Mother's immediate family to Mostar in the same way.

Unfortunately, mother's third sister Esperanca and her brother Moric did not manage to save themselves. They ended up in Jasenovac.

After a few days of our stay in Mostar they took us to the police. They locked us up in a single-storey building which I suppose was meant to be the prison. Because it was only one floor, I opened the window, jumped out and began to run. However the guard at the entrance grabbed me and put me back in "prison". They kept us there for two or three days and then let us go.

Life in Mostar under Italian rule was relatively safe. They enrolled me in school because I could neither read nor write. This schooling didn't last long. My Uncle David, who was a religious man, hired a rabbi who gave me lessons in Judaism.

The winter of 1941 was unusually cold. The water froze in the taps and the rooms we slept in were cold. There was a great food shortage. We needed to flee once more. We heard that the Italians in Hercegovina were to surrender to the Ustaša. This meant camp and certain death. Mother decided that we should seek shelter in Priština, my father's home town. We were given a pass by the Italians. This wasn't free either. My good Uncle David, the husband of Mother's second sister, Erna, gave an Italian commissioner a valuable collection of postage stamps in exchange for the pass.

Jozef from his childhood days, 1945

Again we set out on a journey. Through Dubrovnik, Durrës and Prizren, we arrived in Priština. Father's family were living there, under Italian rule. We stayed in Priština for a couple of months. Mother sold our house and, with the money she raised, we set off, further into the unknown south. We reached Skadar. An Albanian police officer came to the hotel in which we were staying and questioned Mother about where she was from and why we had come. They let us go. Soon we found an apartment with the widow of an officer. We used to call her "Nanny Roz".

In 1943, Fascist Italy capitulated. It didn't take the Germans long to occupy the whole of Albania. They captured the Italians, their former allies, and sent them to prisoner-of-war camps.

We hid under false names and without any documents. At the time my father was in German captivity as a Yugoslav Army officer and doctor. My sister Rašela was four at the time and I was eight. Albania and Skadar – the city in which we were hiding – were soon flooded with German troops. Based on our experience with the Germans and Ustaša

back in Sarajevo, from where we had narrowly escaped deportation to Jasenovac, my mother decided that it was dangerous for us to stay in the apartment we had been living in up to then. She decided that we should change our place of residence once more. This was not easy. Following a great deal of searching and many difficulties, she found a tiny room in the Muslim part of town. So we moved from the Christian-Catholic area to the Muslim area. The Christian and Muslim parts of the town were several kilometres apart. However in terms of lifestyle and customs, it seemed as though they were separated by centuries. Now we needed to adapt to the new surroundings and adopt a new way of life. The most difficult thing of all was coming up with a story which would be acceptable to our new and curious neighbours. They were very interested in learning who we were and why we had come to live there. My mother invented a story which wasn't very different from our real life. The one thing she omitted was the fact that we were Jewish. So we became Muslims, refugees from Yugoslavia, "foreigners". Again we changed our names. My mother Simba became Zaida, I changed from Josip to Jusuf and my sister Rašela was now called Ajša.

It seemed that we would wait for the end of the war in a state of relative safety in the Muslim area, hidden behind the tall walls of Muslim courtyards and houses, along with the landlord's family. Mother even found me a job. As a hardworking Jewish woman she couldn't stand watching me wander the streets idly all day. She found me employment with a dentist. His office was close to the apartment in which we lived. My mother was very proud and happy that I would no longer be wandering the streets and my modest earnings became significant for our reduced domestic budget. We were living on the money from the sale of the house and it was melting away rapidly; already we were running out of money to live on. In the office of my boss, the dentist, I did all the dirty work. I was the youngest apprentice, and quite unqualified. I cleaned everything: dental instruments and the office, the waiting room and the other rooms. I also emptied the dentist's office spittoon.

However this period of relative calm did not last long. It was as though fate had decided to toy with us some more.

It all started on the day our landlord appeared at our door. He cheerfully told us that he would need our room for his son who was getting married. He gave us just a few days to find new accommodation and move out.

It didn't matter any more whether his son was really getting married or whether this was just an excuse for him to throw us out. Mother had two or three days in which to find new accommodation. The difficult wandering and searching through the unfamiliar city in search of a roof began again. She took me with her all the time, holding me by the hand. I served as some kind of proof that we were really refugees and also good and decent people. In those war days it was incomprehensible that a woman should be looking for accommodation on her own. We went from street to street in search of an apartment, at first in our neighbourhood and then further and further away in various parts of the city. We knocked on many doors. Mother begged and implored, prepared to accept any kind of accommodation, any kind of little room, even a shed! But it was all in vain. Even the story that we were refugees, that we were well-behaved and quiet children, didn't help, nor did Mother's promises to pay the rent on time. People who were themselves nervous because of the war and the insecure times did not want new tenants. Through half-open gates they would barely hear us out, then would always give the same reply: there are no rooms, no accommodation. Mother was gripped by a feeling of despair and I was unable to help her.

Finally, following many unsuccessful attempts, there was a glimmer of hope. On the very outskirts of the city, in a settlement which was virtually illegal, a few dozen metres from a German barracks, there was a tiny single-story house for rent. The little house consisted of two spaces – one room and a utility space. It was located in a small and dirty yard without a single tree in it. There was a well in front of the house which was the only source of water for drinking, cooking and all other requirements.

Overjoyed to have found any kind of accommodation, even such as this, Mother agreed to all the landlord's terms. The landlord, a big, tall Albanian with a white *qeleshe*[1] asked that we take good care of his little house and land, and that my sister and I refrain from causing any damage, that we pay rent on time, that is to say that we regularly set money aside for the rent and give it to him when he comes down from the mountain. And finally, that we take care of five bags of grain which he left in our room and protect it from various pests. He had brought the grain to sell it but, not having succeeded, he left it in the room. The landlord went back up to the mountains and we were left alone, in an

[1] The traditional skullcap worn by Albanian men.

unfamiliar neighbourhood, on the outskirts of the city, next to the wire fence of the German barracks. But we weren't alone for long.

At this time the German troops were already withdrawing, so rumour had it, from Greece. This was no longer the victorious army which had conquered the whole of Europe but they were still quite strong, well-organised and well-armed, and capable of inflicting quite a lot more evil in their death throes.

The German organisation Todt was to provide accommodation for these troops. Very soon all free apartments and buildings near the barracks were requisitioned for the needs of the German Army. Many Albanians from the settlement, sensing the danger ahead, withdrew of their own accord and abandoned their homes. They sought shelter in other parts of town or went to the countryside. The German commission in charge of inspecting apartments came to us as well. They looked at our little home and requisitioned the small empty room across from ours. We were separated from this room by a narrow hall, no more than a metre in width. They sealed the room and left. Soon four German soldiers appeared. They removed the seal and moved in. Now we were living almost in direct physical contact with the Germans. We were with them under the same roof and practically sharing the same apartment – a Jewish refugee family and four *Wermacht* soldiers. It was especially difficult for my mother to decide how to behave towards these soldiers, because she spoke good German.

When she was a young child, Mother had spent three years in Vienna. She studied singing and learnt German well, with a Viennese accent. Now, under these circumstances, she didn't know whether speaking German could be life-saving or fatal for us. She had to make a decision on whether to engage the soldiers in conversation immediately and reveal that she spoke German, or to behave as if she understood nothing. But if she should forget herself, and inadvertently expose herself with a gesture or a move, show that she understood what they were talking about! And what if they suspected that she was eavesdropping on their conversations? She decided to speak to them. When she did so they were astonished. Where was she from? How did she come to speak German? Where did she learn to speak German? How had she strayed so far as to end up here? The soldiers showered her with questions. There, on the outskirts of a small Albanian town, a woman who speaks good German and, on top of everything, with a Viennese accent. It soon emerged that the soldiers were also Viennese and were

cursing Hitler, they wanted "the blood to start pouring from his eyes". Over the next few days, contact was established and some kind of life together began. Mother washed their coarse army clothes and overcoats and her hands were bleeding. She, the wife of a royal officer, who before the war had had a maid and a batman, was now washing the linen of German soldiers! Sometimes she would bake them a cake or a pie and, in return, they would give us cans of meat and other food from their army rations. Our savings were almost completely spent. We needed to manage in various ways.

We and the neighbourhood children, boys from nine to ten, lived quite a carefree life during those days. We wandered around the surrounding woods and clearings, collecting snails, turtles and firewood. We didn't go to school. We were barely literate. It was a special challenge for us to trade with the Russian prisoners. The bravest among us used to exchange goods across the wire fence of the barracks with the prisoners of war.

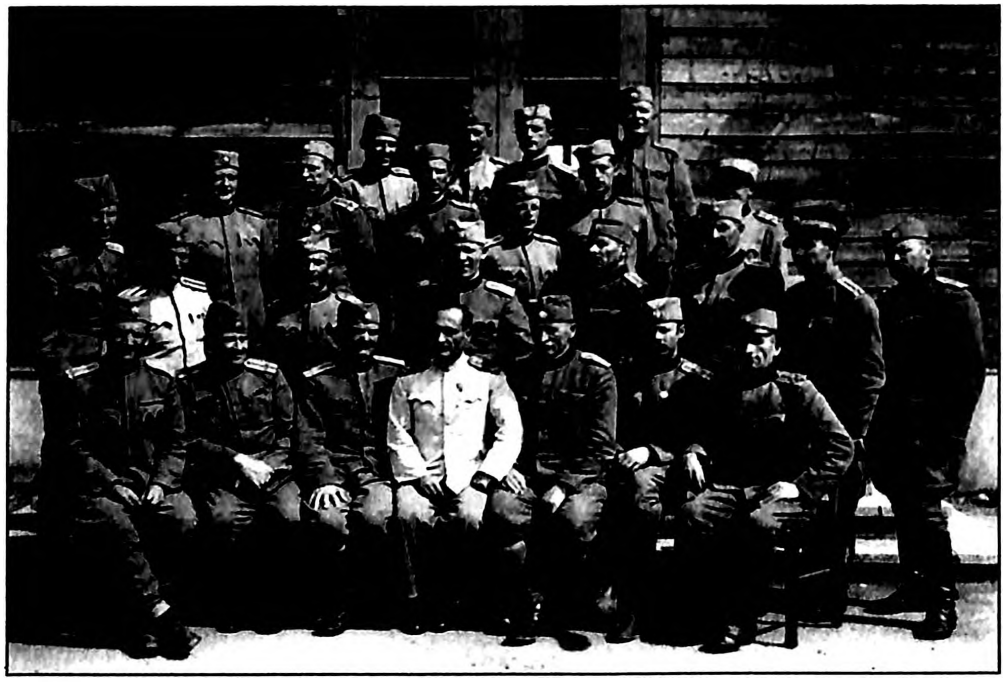
These were Russians who had joined the German troops as auxiliary employees. They agreed to work for the Germans and enjoyed a certain freedom of movement, but were not allowed outside the compound. We bought wine and other alcoholic beverages for them from the nearby taverns. In return they would give us canned food from their rations, clothing and office supplies. The exchange took place at the back, behind the barracks, between strands of barbed wire which had been stretched apart. The German guard sometimes pretended not to see us but, if we went too far he would shout at us and we would scatter. We sold the office supplies to bookshops in town and kept the clothing and the food.

Sometimes the silence of a clearing would be disrupted by the roaring of engines in the distance and this would then get louder and louder. We would know that there was a German motorised convoy coming our way. We would then rush down the clearing and carefully approach it. The convoy would usually stop outside the German barracks. Despite the fact that they were withdrawing, these powerful motorised vehicles filled us with fear, mixed with curiosity and the desire to inspect them closely. The steel colossi were covered in dust and smelt of petrol and warm engine oil.

We watched them from a respectable distance while the German tank drivers, from the turrets of their motorised vehicles, would watch

us numbly, with no expression on their faces. After a short break the convoy would continue its journey to Yugoslavia.

The passing of the German motor convoys could not go unnoticed by the Allied fighters. They attacked them more and more frequently. British fighters came from their bases in Italy, flying over the Adriatic Sea and swept around raining down tracer rounds on the German columns. They also opened machine gun fire on the barracks next door to our home. We children found it very interesting to watch this. For a minute the sky over our heads would be filled with a rain of tracer rounds. The fighters opened machine gun fire on the German columns and ground positions, and the Germans responded strongly from their four-barrel anti-aircraft machine guns. The rounds flew past the wings and fuselages of the fighters. We never even considered the possibility that a British pilot might make a mistake and pour his deadly rain of gunfire on us.



Jozef's father, Haim, was a prisoner of war in the Biberach camp; in this 1942 photograph he is in the front row wearing a white officer's jacket

Occasionally, very high in the sky, in strict formation, with a sound like dull thunder, American bomber squadrons – flying fortresses – also passed. They would leave long, white trails behind them. We would try to count the aircraft. There were hundreds of them and they

were heading for Romania and Germany. There they would dump their deadly cargo and return the same way. The Germans didn't even try to stop them.

One day a tall German officer appeared at our door. He was serious. He had a large, red dog on a leash. He threw me and my sister out of the room and stayed alone with my mother. A sharp, guttural German accent and my mother's sobbing voice were soon heard from the room.

After half an hour of shouting and weeping, the officer and his dog came from the room and, behind him, our mother, as white as a ghost. What had happened? The rumour had reached the ears of the German officer – intelligence officer – that living near the barracks was a woman who spoke fluent German with a Viennese accent. She lived in the same house in which German soldiers were accommodated. In the land of the eagles, this Balkan back country, such a combination of circumstances was certainly very suspicious. Especially at this delicate time when the Germans were withdrawing. They needed to get themselves out of Greece, work their way through the Albanian gorges, pass through Yugoslavia and somehow reach Austria and Germany with as few casualties as possible. The routes and times of their withdrawal had to be kept as secret as possible. The officer wanted to know who this woman was and what she was doing so close to the German barracks and the German troops. Mother's sangfroid and father's letters from captivity, written on a special form for German prisoners of war, verified with the stamp of the camp, probably saved our lives once again. It was clear to the officer that he had before him the wife of a Jewish prisoner of war, because the name indicated unambiguously that he was a Jew. As for her, perhaps she was Aryan and perhaps she wasn't. But this was not longer important. He had more important business to attend to and he left.

All around us, events indicated that the end of the war was approaching. German motorised convoys passed almost every day, they would stop only briefly and continue. On some gigantic trucks, holes in the windshields from machine-gun fire could be seen. In the barracks and the surrounding buildings, German soldiers were burning documents, papers, furniture and anything that seemed unnecessary. We children would enter the barracks and the surrounding buildings without fear. We took whatever seemed useful, whatever we thought we might need. The Russians were drinking more and more alcohol. And

we kept running back and forth from the tavern to the barracks. Our tenants were packing and waiting for movement orders.

Once more fate demanded that my mother, a gentle and sensitive woman, show courage and presence of mind. We were again visited by a German officer, a different one. With him he had a terrified young woman. Again they threw my sister and me from the room, and then my mother's penetrating weeping and the rough male voice of the officer were heard from inside the room. After a short conversation, the officer and the young woman left the room. What had happened? The young woman had been used by the Germans for entertainment and now, because they were withdrawing, she had become a burden they needed to get rid of. They wanted to leave her with us, with the woman who spoke German. But my mother was strongly opposed to this. From her moral standpoint it was not permissible for this woman to stay with us even for a moment, although the unfortunate woman could not have made any significant change to our life as it was. The officer and the woman packed up and left.

Finally the day of liberation dawned. There was shooting all night, the explosions echoed. We had no idea who was shooting who or why. The following day it was completely calm. No joyous celebrations, no welcoming of liberators. Total peace! As though the people of the land of eagles were not used to public expressions of sentiment, or perhaps they didn't know what awaited them with the new authorities. They were on their guard. Yet another unpleasant surprise awaited us later that day. Sharp German commands were heard in the distance. Mother shuddered. "What, are they back again?" was her first question.

Later we learnt that the Partisan army had engaged a German officer, a prisoner, to train Partisan units in basic military skills. We were happy that we had survived all this and now we needed to think about how we would return home. We had no means of support and I had to continue my tours of the barracks and collecting things that we could perhaps sell. Now the owners were new people. On one of these tours, when I tried to collect some coal for heating, a Partisan guard grabbed me and my friend by the hand. He put us in prison. After several hours spent in the Partisan prison, he let us out as we sincerely repented and promised that we would mend our ways. Soon we left for Tirana with a Partisan pass and returned to Yugoslavia in a large convoy of Yugoslav trucks.